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Editorial: Death causes public, court says

THE ISSUE

Indiana Supreme Court ruling in favor of access to causes of death.

OUR VIEW

This is a win for all Hoosiers.

In a majority opinion authored by Justice Mark Massa Oct. 7, the Indiana Supreme Court sided unanimously in favor of public access to causes of death.

“The [ruling] came in a lawsuit filed by the Evansville Courier & Press and a Pike County woman after the Vanderburgh County Health Department denied access to the information in 2012,” The Associated Press reported Oct. 8. “The health department said state law required it to restrict access to the information. A local judge had sided with the agency and the state appeals court upheld his ruling.”

The Courier & Press didn’t accept either ruling and — with the help of Attorney General Greg Zoeller, the Hoosier State Press Association Foundation Board and Indiana Coalition of Open Government — fought

those decisions all the way to the state's highest court. And all Hoosiers should be grateful.

"Finally a court got it right in this case — and recognized there are three types of death records in play with different levels of public access for each," wrote Steve Key, executive director and general counsel of the HSPA, in a letter we published on the Opinion page Oct. 11.

This decision is important because of the effect it can have on entire communities.

"Cause of death may not be pleasant to think about," wrote Bob Zaltsberg, Herald-Times editor, in a column we published Thursday. "But access to the information can lead to understanding health risks in a family; can hold authorities accountable in the case of a high profile death; or can point to serious public health or environmental risks in a community."

To use an example that hits close to home, if Howard County Coroner Jay Price hadn't recognized the trend of high-volume opiate deaths in our community, the Wagoner Medical Clinic might still be in the business of poisoning our citizens. While the revelation of such information may be painful for a grieving family, public culpability in these matters is essential to the health of our state.